

# EXPONENTIAL

## *Spiritual Awakenings*

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### Session 8: The Second Great Awakening #3

#### Charles G. Finney (1792-1875)

- Finney is known as the “founder of professional evangelism”, “the father of modern revivalism”, and more.
- He is known primarily for his evangelism and revivals, but his work as a theologian and social reformer influenced his views and practices as a revivalist.

#### Early Life and Conversion

- Born on a farm near Warren, Connecticut, on 29 August 1792. When he was two years old, his family moved to the wilderness of central New York. His was not a Christian home.
- Began a law career. Despite his lack of conviction, he attended church. He soon became dissatisfied with the church he attended and turned to another one pastored by George W. Gale. Because of his musical talent, Finney served as choir director for a church.
- Finney and Gale often got into discussions and even debates concerning points of the Bible. Some church members, including Finney’s later wife, began to pray for Charles’ conversion.
- At age 29, on 7 October 1821, Finney decided to resolve his own salvation issue. Over the next few days, he spent much time searching the scriptures and in prayer. On the following Wednesday morning Finney headed to his office, but just before he arrived he was confronted with questions. Instead of going to the office, Finney headed to a place in the woods he knew well. He felt the need to be alone and pour out his soul to God.
- Finney spent most of the day in the woods. Around dinner time, he went to his office and began to play and sing sacred music. As he played, he wept. He knew he was meeting the Lord. Finney was saved.

#### Early Revivals

- Finney began to preach immediately, though he was not ordained until 1 July 1824. The Presbytery ordained him even though they found his preaching rather unimpressive.
- Soon after his ordination, Finney was employed to preach by a congregation meeting at Aaron Dresser’s Barn. In October 1824, Finney married. Soon after his marriage, he began his career as a revivalist.
- Finney experienced “nine glorious years” from 1824-32. He held revivals in northern and western New York.
- Finney’s revival tour created what is now known as the “burned over district” meaning that the area had been so heavily evangelized as to have no “fuel” [unconverted people] left over to “burn” [convert].
- The year 1826 was a momentous one for Finney. In that year Finney preached his breakthrough meeting in Rome near Oneida County, NY. God moved so powerfully that Finney preached 20 consecutive nights. Prayer meetings were held during the day. 500 were converted. A local pastor reported that “religion was the principle subject of conversation in our streets, stores, and even taverns.”
- While leading the Rome revival, Finney went to Utica to attend a funeral in the First Presbyterian Church. The pastor asked Finney to preach. Revival came and attracted national attention as 500 converts were recorded.
- Success continued; however, severe opposition and criticism arose. Finney’s followers formed a group known as the “Holy Band.”

#### The New Lebanon Convention and Rochester Revival

- In July 1827, 18 clergymen, including Asahel Nettleton and Lyman Beecher, held a conference in New Lebanon, NY, to settle the dispute concerning Finney’s revival methods. The conference did not settle anything; however, Nettleton lost his popularity and Finney gained even more.

- The Rochester Revival of 1830-31 demonstrated the single greatest effect of Finney's ministry. Lyman Beecher called it, "the greatest work of God and the greatest revival of religion that the world has ever seen in so short a time." Huge crowds flocked to hear him. Out of a population of 10,000, a thousand were saved. Some 40 men entered the ministry, many as foreign missionaries. Newspapers noted the universal impact of the revival felt among students, mechanics, professionals, and politicians.

#### Later Ministry

- Illness eventually caused Finney to limit his travels, and he became pastor of the Chatham Street Chapel in New York. This theatre turned into a church was also the site of the first national Sunday School Convention.
- He subsequently pastored the Broadway Tabernacle of NY (1836-37). Its circular shape allowed Finney's gaze to touch all people. He also served as pastor of the First Congregational Church in Oberlin, OH (1837-72).
- Finney also became professor of theology at the newly established Oberlin Collegiate Institute in OH (now Oberlin College) in 1835. He would spend half of each year at his pastorate in NY and the other half at the school in OH. While occupying the chair of theology at Oberlin, Finney was heavily involved in social reform. He also spread the theories of perfectionism, which had an influence on later holiness movements. In 1851 he became president of the school and continued to teach there until his death in 1875.

#### Finney's Theology of Revival

- Finney used the terms of Calvinism but infused those terms with his own meaning. He rejected Calvinism's central concepts without accepting all the answers of Arminianism.
- Finney emphasized freedom of the will, general atonement, and the active role of the individual in conversion.
- Nature of Man
  - Finney's doctrine of human sin was central to his theology. He acknowledged human depravity, but he saw it as related to human action, not human nature. Since man is not depraved in his nature, the sinner had the natural ability to obey God. Consequently, conversion was a willful change of one's heart.
- Conversion
  - For Finney, the human personality is a combination of intellect, emotion, and will. Intellect and emotion are by nature passive while will is voluntary. Appealing to emotion by rhetoric or any other artificial device, for Finney, is not only unnatural but also dangerous. Authentic excitement only comes from an encounter with the truth.
  - Finney saw three agents and one instrument in conversion. Agents: God, messenger, sinner. Instrument: truth. The Holy Spirit acted as a persuading prosecutor. He impressed the truth upon the sinner with such tremendous power that the sinners were induced to turn. Therefore, for Finney, the task of the Christian preacher is to cooperate with the Holy Spirit by pressing the same biblical truth to the mind and conscience of the sinner.
- Revival
  - Whereas Jonathan Edwards viewed revival as a purely supernatural work, Finney believed "revival was not a miracle, nor dependent upon a miracle, in any sense," and it was "a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means."<sup>1</sup> However, as in the case of conversion, he recognized the necessity of God's blessing for revival.
  - Mass evangelism ever since Finney has presupposed upon the insistence upon the freedom of the will, unlimited atonement, and the active role of the individual in exercising repentance and faith as prior conditions of regeneration.
- Methods of Revival
  - Finney was known for his "New Measures." Many of these, however, were not new to Finney, he just synthesized them and brought them together.
  - Measures
    - Style and Method of Preaching: without notes, used "you," simple illustrations and vocabulary, avoided complex theological terminology, colloquial.
    - Prayer Meetings during a protracted meeting promoted ecumenical union, increased brotherly love, cultivated confidence in the campaign, promoted spiritual growth, moved God to bestow a blessing, and influenced sinners to be converted.
    - Anxious Meetings: used for the purpose of holding personal conversation with anxious sinner, and to adapt instruction the cases of individuals to lead them immediately to Christ.

- Protracted Meetings: series of days given to religious services, in order to make the impression of Divine things in the minds of the people. Took his lead from the Jewish festivals.
- Anxious Seats (Mourner's bench): the anxious were here addressed particularly and made subjects of prayer, as well as conversed with individually.

### **The Effects of the Second Great Awakening**

- Denominational growth and church expansion
  - Formation of new denominations: Among the new denominations that grew from the religious ferment of the Second Great Awakening are the Churches of Christ, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church..
- Social Reform
  - Private initiative:
    - During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, America had struggled through issues related to the meaning of freedom.
    - Emphasis on the individual in the religion realm was also popular. The conversion of the individual was emphasized. Testimonies were encouraged.
    - It also came forth in church trends. The new goal was to reconstruct the church along voluntary lines. In other words, rather than seeking converts from existing denominations, people took the initiative to build the church from the ground up.
  - Perfectionistic Theology & The Obligation of Benevolence
    - Taught that converts ought to work not only for his or her own moral and spiritual perfection, but also for the moral and spiritual perfection of society. Thus, Christians had the duty and the ability to eliminate society's sin. This elimination of sin was an "obligation of benevolence," because sin's elimination would help people. Christians should never be comfortable, but they should always seek what more they can do to bear the image of Christ.
    - Much of this was influence by the millennialist mindset that Christ would soon return. The 19th century evangelical reformers believed the Kingdom could be ushered in by prayer, missionary endeavors, and other acts of Christian benevolence.
  - The Birth of Societies
    - Hundreds of societies developed with different foci including the American Bible Society (1816), American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810), American Sunday School Union (1817), American Tract Society (1826), and the American Home Missionary Society (1826).
  - Abolition and Theodore Dwight Weld (Finney's most famous convert)
    - Emphasis on free will and the advocacy to destroy sin and free those enslaved by it, gave much fuel to the abolitionist movement.
    - Weld was perhaps the man most responsible for the spread of abolitionism. He trained agents to preach against slavery.
  - Temperance Reform and Lyman Beecher
    - John Wesley had encouraged Methodists to abstain from intoxicating drinks. In 1800, America adopted a pledge on the evils of intoxication. Even still, most instances of church discipline in the early 1800s were provoked by the sin of drunkenness. It seemed as if whiskey were the new water! Between 1800 and 1830, American per capita alcohol consumption was higher than the national average in 1980!
    - Beecher was alarmed by this and led a successful campaign for temperance.

**Statement:** While it is Jesus who changes hearts, it is Christians who preach Jesus.

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:13-16

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<sup>i</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 12.